

CHAIRMAN'S CONCLUDING REMARKS *

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WE, the program planning committee and The New York Academy of Medicine, are pleased with your interest and response.

The program committee had some difficulties. For example, a letter in *Science* appeared by a critic of nuclear reactors. His letter alluded to the decision of the Committee on Public Health of The New York Academy of Medicine concerning stockpiling potassium iodide in the City of New York. The Committee, with the expert assistance of authorities on nuclear reactors and potassium iodide, had come to the conclusion that stockpiling KI in New York City was inadvisable. The letter by this objector implied that we were unduly influenced by a publication from the Electric Power Research Institute. That individual was the only one of the invited speakers who would not consent to make a presentation.

Balancing viewpoints in a meeting like this is exceedingly difficult. Our committee was particularly sensitive to the attempt to balance biases and to avoid stressing the industrial input. The public health is our advocacy.

Any defects in this symposium were those of omission. We sought the most knowledgeable people that our program committee could find as speakers and participants, but it is difficult to obtain an exact balance. But our audience was not really balanced. One of the regulators in the audience came to me and said, "Well, do you think we are just talking to ourselves, or do we hear differences of opinions?." I was particularly pleased to hear some contrary comments.

Some consensus views emerged. For instance, most clearly, stress was considered the most important biological effect. Also, there was a consensus view by the speakers on another issue, namely, evacuation. Think of the impact of that statement. The public perceives evacuation as far more important than do the scientists who have considered this problem in their presentations. Is evacuation feasible and indicated? At this meeting we have been told by those whom we trusted as authorities that the way to

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handle the public in the likely incident was not by evacuating, but rather to seek shelter, take a shower, and breathe through wet handkerchiefs.

We also had biological effects of radiation discussed. Dr. Bond referred to an almost-century-old law of Bergonier and Tribondeau. He invoked it to indicate that the biological effect of radiation is greater the more immature the tissue. He developed it up from 1913 to the present to point out that the carcinogenic effects that we are talking about relate more to the immature, to children, than to adults.

In discussion on cancer of the thyroid, Dr. Bond was not certain whether KI should be used prophylactically. Cancer of the thyroid represents a model for experimental measurements in man of the effects of radiation. No question about it! But conflicting interpretations of public health significance persist.

The use of potassium iodide to block the thyroid uptake of radioactive iodine has been discussed as a prophylactic in the event of a nuclear power plant incident by many bodies, including The New York Academy of Medicine. The Committee on Public Health was not naive. It recognized KI as an effective blocking agent but considered the stockpiling and distribution of potassium iodide as impractical and undesirable in the City of New York. This was among other detailed objections to its use as a prophylactic.

We have heard here, too, the clarion cry in consensus for one voice to keep the public informed at the time of an incident. That sounds reassuring to us. Such a single appeal seems virtuous and reasonable, until we note the melange of federal abbreviations: NRC, EPA, HHS, DOT, USDA, DOD, DOE, and FEMA. No wonder that this alphabet soup mixes acrimony with acronyms. It furthers anxiety with the search for leadership. Yet when one reads the record at this meeting we hope that the responsible federal agency will be clarified.

Is the physician the responsible voice? Well, certainly not if he is Dr. Strangelove or Papa Doc. But whoever speaks—the governor, the commissioner, the mayor, or the president—must clearly be a voice which is obviously backed up by experts in many more fields than just medicine.

As we end this symposium, we might ask ourselves a question, “Is nuclear power here to stay?.” Alvin Weinberg, of course, would be predictably enthusiastic and say, “Yes.” And indeed he did here. Recently the World Health Organization and the International Atomic Energy Association have issued a statement which I quote: “If the world is to develop, with goods and welfare shared more widely and more equitably,

hard energy demands will require the utilization of a wide variety of appropriate sources of energy, including nuclear power.”* The statement goes on with recognition of the risk to health of nuclear power.

The Academy is grateful to the audience for its participation, interest, and stimulation. The benefits and risks of radiation will occupy an important place in future studies and evaluation by the Committee on Public Health of the New York Academy of Medicine.

*World Health Organization and International Atomic Energy Agency: *Nuclear Power, the Environment and Man*. As cited in “A Report from WHO Endorses Use of Nuclear Power”: *The Nations Health* 14:4, April 1983.